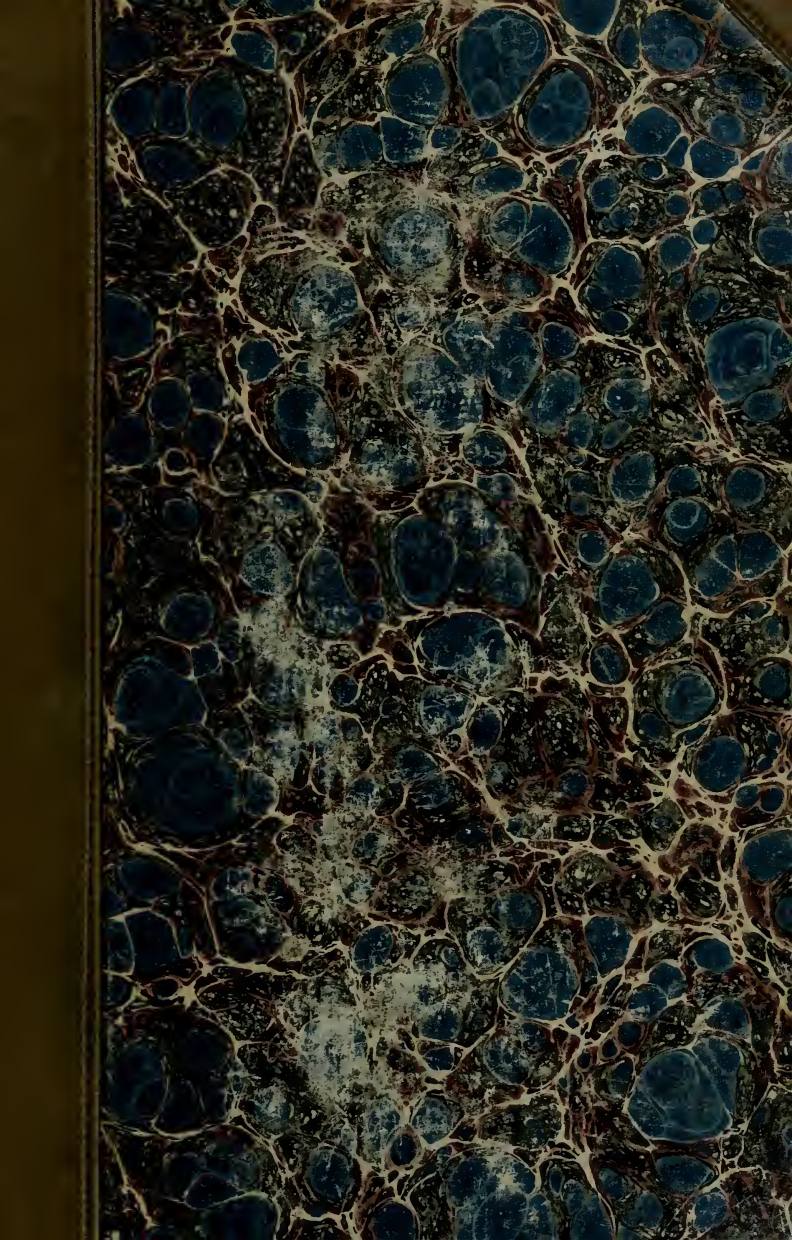
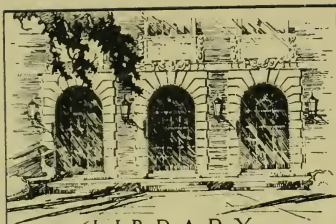






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EXTRAORDINARY
DECREASE IN CRIME

At Luton,
AND THE ACTION WHICH HAS PRODUCED IT.

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DECREASE IN CRIME AT LUTON, &c.

AN isolated and local decrease in crime, so sudden and so decided as that which has taken place during the last two years in the town of Luton, is I believe without a parallel in the social history of this country, and the action which produced it is I think worthy of investigation.

To show its extent and thus at the outset enlist your attention, let me give you the figures as they are furnished by the police, premising that Luton is a manufacturing town of new and rapid growth containing about 21,000 inhabitants. In making up the whole mass of crime, great and small, we had in 1868, 365 offences; in 1869, 368 offences; in 1870, 285 offences; whilst in the nine months ending Michaelmas, 1871, we have had 163, or supposing the average to be

maintained to the close of the year we should have about 200, but as there is a great decline also during this quarter in the general mass of crime, I may say that the total number of offences against the law has been diminished by more than one-half. Thus the gravest description of crime has been reduced to *less than one-fourth*, whilst in the year 1868 it would seem that about one-fourth of these grave crimes escaped detection, in the year just ended, but one undetected crime of this class is recorded. Misdemeanors have also decreased four per cent., and poaching offences one-fourth.

I may represent the decrease in yet another way. Some dozen years ago a police station was built with six cells in it; these were found three or four years ago to be quite insufficient, and six more were added—they were frequently so full that the corridor and guard room were used at night. Now the inspector reports that three cells would be sufficient, and indeed for the last month they have been quite unoccupied, no prisoners having been detained in the cells for our

weekly petty sessions during that period.

This then is the result ; let us now seek for the cause, and in arriving at it we must not make it dependent either on the fluctuations of trade, an increase in the number or efficiency of the police, the operation of the vagrancy laws, or the increased severity of prison discipline.

Our action then was entirely founded on recent legislation. Of one Act we had already largely availed ourselves ; I mean, the Juvenile Offenders and Reformatory Act ; I observe that its efficiency has lately been to a certain degree questioned, but to me it seems only to require firm and judicious working. The rule we laid down was never to commit to a Reformatory on a first offence, but invariably to commit on a second ; by the first rule it is true we sometimes discharged boys whose homes, or want of homes, made it certain that they would soon come back again, but then they did come back again and were then dealt with. Thus we had been to a certain extent for some time cutting off the supply of crime.

The Habitual Criminals and Licensing Acts supplied the means we required for dealing with existing crime.

The Habitual Criminals Act dealt rigorously with the Marine Store dealers, and we enforced its provisions, the clauses which prohibit the purchase of small quantities of broken metal we found most salutary and generally we placed these shops under the surveillance of the police, not in such a way as to impede regular trade, but so as to render irregular traffic extremely dangerous; in every case in which there was a choice between convicting a receiver and a thief we unhesitatingly chose the former, especially if the thief was young in crime, the contrary practice has very much prevailed and has left nurseries of crime untouched, without which its commission would have been much more difficult.

The alteration in the Licensing Laws gave us the additional powers we still wanted.

The Magistrates were enabled to issue a notice, of which the following is a copy:—

“Any person who occupies or keeps any

Lodging House, Beer House, Public House, or other place where excisable liquors are sold, or place of entertainment or public resort, and knowingly lodges or harbours thieves or imputed thieves, or knowingly permits them or suffers them to assemble therein, or allows the deposit of goods therein, having reasonable cause for believing them to be stolen, shall then be liable on summary conviction to a penalty not exceeding ten pounds, and the Justice or Magistrate before whom he may be brought may require him to enter into his own recognizances, with or without sureties, for keeping the peace and being of good behaviour during twelve months, and any licence for the sale of excisable liquors or for keeping any place of public resort which has been granted to the occupier or keeper of any such house or place as aforesaid, shall be forfeited on the FIRST conviction of any offence under this Act."

Observe what this clause takes away from convicted criminals, and the position in which it places them.

They may not be lodged together in com-

mon lodging houses, they may not be harboured in Beer Houses under pretence of recreation or refreshment; if they are, a first conviction forfeits the licence; and it must be noted that a conviction is not of absolute necessity for breaking up a nest of crime of this description; if it shall appear to the Magistrates on the licensing day that any house is the habitual resort of convicted or disorderly persons, they may on that ground refuse the licence.

Yet another safeguard remains: the Magistrates may refuse a licence on the defective personal character of the applicant; and it is to be observed that the onus lies upon the applicant to show his respectability; very frequently a few written recommendations, untested even, or coming from interested parties, are taken to be sufficient as a matter of course. We adopted a very different system; if the applicant was a stranger, the police enquired into his antecedents, and tested his references; very many applicants were in this way and from this cause rejected.

On these several grounds we refused

licences to THIRTY-FOUR public houses in one day, and in round numbers have reduced them by about one-fifth.

So it has come to this, that the old typical keeper of the thieves' public house, the successful thief retired on his earnings, the receiver, or at any rate, the kindly patron of crime, has passed away, and public houses must be kept by respectable men with characters to forfeit, and houses which will be forfeited by transgression, and the position in which convicted persons are placed, presents these features:—

(1.) The power of concerted crime is gone. Now for successful and systematic crime of a serious character, concert is almost a necessity. Take the graver crimes of burglary, house-breaking, or highway-robbery, they are generally managed in this way: The parties meet in some contiguous public house to watch the dwelling or the victim, and they meet afterwards in the same way to dispose of the booty; but if two or three convicted persons were to be seen lingering together about a street, they would become the objects

of suspicion, and be themselves watched accordingly.

(2.) The opportunity for instruction and temptation to crime is in a measure cut off, that will for the most part occur in the public house. An innocent man does not often become the associate of thieves from a chance meeting in the streets or the workshop; the low public house is for the most part the school, as well as the home, of crime.

But the most salutary action of these laws still remains.

(3.) The criminal has become a criminal because he dislikes steady work, because he likes to lounge away his time and drink himself drunk in a public house, because his intemperate habits preclude his employment, and because he lacks a sufficient stimulus to drive him to honest labour.

But his condition now is changed; he gets up in the morning late, having been out half the night. In the old time he would have betaken himself to a thieves' house of call, and whiled away the day with some congenial

friends: that house is gone now, and if he betakes himself to some better class house, the landlord in mortal terror for his licence hurries him out of the house with all speed, and he must hang about the streets as the long day drags on. When night comes matters are worse for him; the police relieved from the duty of watching and controlling these low public houses, are everywhere on the alert; he sees little chance of following his trade: the public houses are all lit up, tempting him with his one idea of happiness; but he is a Pariah; he must not join the parties assembled there: he may try house after house, the answer is always the same, "you are a convicted thief, we must not harbour you," and so the life becomes at once impracticable and intolerable.

These men have said over and over again, "In mercy, give us three months and let us have done with it, but do not hunt us about like this."

It is a stern remedy, I admit, one unjustifiable, save for a great end. We are hunting him to honesty and respectability; there are

places where he may always be safe, and where our instructions are urgent he shall not be followed. If he is at work, he is safe from the note of the police; if he is at home he is safe from their intrusion; it is only from the PUBLIC HOUSE, which has been HIS RUIN, that we drive him.

And at this point I may add one more very important element in the diminution of crime in the Luton Division. The merit of a police officer is gauged not by the number of convictions he procures, but by the absence of crime on his beat; the opposite test has, I fear, in other parts of the country, been productive of much evil; it is so often a matter of choice to the police, whether they will prevent and extirpate crime, or be content with leaving its commission feasible; so long as its detection is frequent, that where the merit of a police officer is weighed by the number of his convictions, you will surely find that crime will be very slow in its decline.

This is the course then we have pursued: I have given you the result as regards the diminution of crime.

But what has become of the criminals? Our superintendent has not lost sight of this point and has made it a matter of special observation; he roughly estimates their number at about three hundred. One half at least of these he notes have gone to work; these men instead of lounging about the streets ragged and disreputable, are now prospering, many of them with decent Sunday clothes, and striving hard to emancipate themselves from the black list: about fifty have disappeared altogether, I believe many of them have betaken themselves to the usual resources of unskilled labour in extremity. About one hundred remain who are still more or less unsatisfactory, but they are not living on the produce of crime in the Luton division at any rate, because no undetected crime is reported; probably they manage to get on by means of irregular employment and pilfering of so minute a character that it escapes notice or is not thought worth reporting to the police; possibly they may occasionally visit less closely preserved localities, the Magistrates of which have of course the same

remedy in their hands as we have had in ours.

And this diminished number is receiving very few additions—the criminal life is no longer attractive and youthful crime is cut very short, so that in concluding my record of diminished crime I may express a hope, which has in it something of assurance, that, if the same measures are unflinchingly pursued, and if Christianity and Education are enabled still more largely to co-operate with the executive, crime will still further decline till it is reduced to a minimum, a fraction of its former amount, especially if one earnest wish I have might be fulfilled, with regard to which recent legislation, prolific in repressive measures, has been singularly barren—I mean, that not only the way of transgression may be made hard, but the way from a criminal life to the life of an honest citizen might be made a little more smooth, I had almost said in many instances, a little more possible.

It will be observed that in this paper I have treated only of the decrease in more serious crime.

I have not had time to enlarge on the less obtrusive working of these measures, and I think it is hardly necessary. I need not tell you of the results produced by the removal of those houses in which adulterated drinks, which brutalize and inflame, are principally sold; by the suppression of houses where honest and dishonest earnings are dissipated in gaming (the sure resource of a failing public-house); of houses to which the title of brothels is more applicable than that of public houses, in which many an unfallen girl is first inured into profligacy; of the removal of so many temptations to intemperance, a crime in itself and the parent of crime; these results I may safely leave you, as thinking men, for yourselves to estimate, only pointing out to you that the minor offences which spring more directly from these sources have diminished by one half, and are still rapidly diminishing.

